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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000154

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TAGS: FAIR PGOV PREL MASS MCAP LE ET
SUBJECT: CRASH OF ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES 409, GOL CRISIS
MANAGEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The January 25 crash of Ethiopian Airlines flight 409 into the Mediterranean minutes after takeoff from the Beirut airport has brought to light the GOL's weak crisis management planning and interagency coordination. While such deficiencies are common around the world, Lebanon's unique political environment exacerbated difficulties, and its public relations handling of the accident in particular suffered. On a more positive note, the crash also showcased the ability of the U.S. military and other USG agencies to provide rapid and effective assistance in response to such disasters. American assistance from the U.S. Navy, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) proved crucial to the success of the investigation and salvage operation, and the GOL has repeatedly expressed its profound gratitude for our help. Although the result of the investigation is not yet public, it will likely place blame for the crash on the actions of the aircraft's two pilots. The NTSB representative leading the investigation (please protect) anticipates that the findings will lead to rough times for Ethiopia's national airline. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ethiopian Airlines (ET) flight 409 crashed into the Mediterranean off the Lebanese coast about four minutes after takeoff at 2:30 am local time on January 25. The crash of ET 409, a Boeing 737-800 aircraft with 90 people on board, was Lebanon's first air disaster in more than 40 years. Heavy thunderstorms in the vicinity of Beirut's international airport at the time of the crash, coupled with early "eyewitness" reports in the media of "fireballs" and midair explosions, quickly confused the situation. Within hours of the crash, more than a dozen intact bodies and floating wreckage were recovered from the water not far from the seaside airport, but the remainder of the wreckage and the victims remained undiscovered for more than a week.

THE U.S. RESPONSE

¶3. (SBU) We learned of the event when Prime Minister Hariri telephoned the Ambassador before dawn on January 25, shortly after the aircraft crashed, to request U.S. assistance in locating the plane. With the help of the Department's Operations Center, that request was quickly relayed to U.S. forces in the region, resulting in the dispatch of the USS

Ramage and a P-3 aircraft to aid in the search. The USS Ramage arrived on the scene by late afternoon on January 25 and joined Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and commercial craft in the search. The P-3 ultimately returned to base after the Lebanese authorities said they did not believe they required its assistance. A dive advance team from Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit (MDSU) Two arrived from Bahrain on January 26 to provide technical assistance to the GOL and prepare for possible diving operations. USS Ramage remained on the scene, scanning the water with sonar and recovering debris, until February 1. On February 3, the rescue and salvage ship USNS Grapple arrived to relieve USS Ramage. USNS Grapple remained in Lebanese waters until February 12, providing both a platform for the MDSU Two divers and a command and control center for the larger salvage operation.

¶4. (SBU) Since the airplane involved in the crash was manufactured in the United States, on January 28 an investigative team led by the NTSB and including representatives of the FAA and Boeing arrived in Beirut. Separately, a team of more than a dozen Ethiopian officials (including initially the foreign minister) and representatives of Ethiopian Airlines came to Lebanon to participate in the search and investigation efforts.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

¶5. (C) The day after the crash, the Prime Minister's office designated Director General of Civil Aviation Hamdi Chaouk as the lead official for the investigation. Chaouk, who had no

previous experience with crash investigations, waited for the NTSB-led team to arrive from the U.S. on January 28 before starting the investigation. Chaouk relied heavily on the team. Poor communication between Chaouk and the LAF officers given authority to manage the search and recovery operation contributed to a week-long delay in locating the wreckage despite accurate leads from the investigation team on the probable crash location. While U.S. accredited representative and NTSB investigator Dennis Jones praised Chaouk's professionalism in a difficult situation, he noted that the DG had been forced to spend vast amounts of time doing "damage control" in response to misleading or false information disseminated by other high-level GOL officials in the days after the crash.

RESPONSIBLE PEOPLE SAYING
IRRESPONSIBLE THINGS

¶6. (C) Jones cited public relations as the weakest part of the GOL response to the accident. He told us, "what is unique here is that you had responsible people saying irresponsible things on a daily basis." Jones noted that the Lebanese government had not spoken with a single, coordinated voice, which had made the post-crash period especially difficult for victims' families. Indeed, statements on January 25 from both the prime minister's office and the LAF announcing that survivors and bodies had been found turned out to be a complete fabrication, apparently disseminated in an effort to give hope to the families. Minister of Public Works and Transportation Ghazi Aridi speculated publicly on January 26 that the pilot's failure to follow instructions from the control tower caused the crash. In subsequent days, Aridi repeatedly released information that would normally be confidential until the conclusion of the investigation. He also announced several events before they could be confirmed, such as the February 10 "retrieval" of the cockpit voice recorder (which turned out not to have been retrieved).

¶7. (C) Separately, Minister of Health Jawad Khalifeh publicly theorized February 9 that the plane must have exploded in midair, since most of the victims, bodies retrieved had been dismembered. (Note: Investigators quickly ruled out an explosion as the cause of the crash. The NTSB team observed that dismemberment was almost guaranteed for a body that hit

the water at high speed and then spent two weeks in salt water inhabited by animal life. End note.) Though the investigation team found no sign of fire or explosion following the accident, Khalifeh only partially retracted his statement later, saying the word "'explosion' doesn't imply a military act." Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud, for his part, contributed his own analysis to the press before the conclusion of the investigation, saying, "According to available information, it is believed the airliner was not completely burnt..."

POLITICS COMPLICATES THINGS

¶ 18. (C) The free-for-all media announcements from GOL ministries partially stemmed from the lack of a single person responsible for communicating government information on the crash, in addition to the political jockeying common in Lebanon's fractured political confessional system. Civil Aviation DG Chaouk, who is a Sunni, told the NTSB's Jones that he had denied some "confidential" information to his superior, Transportation Minister Aridi (a Druze from the Progressive Socialist Party), while feeding information directly to Sunni PM Saad Hariri's office. Pro-opposition Amal party Health Minister Khalifeh was also not privy to any real-time information on the investigation. Neither of them was barred from speaking to the media, however, and both have done so frequently, apparently in efforts to bolster their own standing.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

¶ 19. (SBU) The crash has made clear to the Lebanese their need for some sort of crisis management agency or plan within the GOL. President Michel Sleiman told Al-Manar TV, "a permanent committee for emergencies and managing crises should be formed in case a tragedy similar to (the crash) occurs again," while Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah called for the GOL to "provide all logistical means of facing any disaster," so that Lebanon would not rely much on foreign assistance. Jones suggested that the GOL pay particular attention to its treatment of the families of victims of such crises. Indeed, the families of the victims sat for days at the airport with little or no information before heading home, and most have received word of the latest developments through the press rather than from an official government source.

U.S. ASSISTANCE CRUCIAL

¶ 10. (C) Lebanon has a bilateral agreement with France to assist it following air disasters, and a team from the French NTSB-equivalent, the BEA, has been on the ground since a day after the crash. Out of the public eye, however, the GOL has relied principally on U.S. assistance since the day of the accident, and a variety of officials -- from President Sleiman to PM Hariri to Defense Minister Murr to LAF marine commandos diving for wreckage -- have thanked their U.S. counterparts repeatedly for the help provided. Embassy Defense Attaché Office (DAO) and Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) staff were on the scene immediately after the crash, assisting the LAF and calling in resources. When the USS Ramage departed Lebanese waters after participating in the early search operation, the USNS Grapple and the MDSU Two dive team located the flight data recorder and removed the largest pieces of debris so that the Lebanese marine commandos could retrieve the device. They later cleared additional wreckage that led to the recovery on February 16 of the cockpit voice recorder. Jones admitted that he and the FAA and Boeing team members had done the heavy lifting on the investigation and were essentially writing the report on its findings for the Lebanese. About a week into the salvage operation, Jones and his team also became the primary point of contact for the LAF officers overseeing the recovery of the wreckage, bodies, and flight voice and data recorders,

serving a vital coordination role in concert with the Embassy DAO and ODC.

**CONCLUSIONS: ROUGH ROAD
AHEAD FOR THE ETHIOPIANS**

¶11. (C) The GOL has not yet released its official, internationally-mandated report on the likely causes of the crash, though DG Chaouk expects to provide a preliminary report of the investigation's findings to the Lebanese government by February 25. Jones and his team confided to us before they departed Beirut that the investigation report will fault the Ethiopian pilots, both of whom were inexperienced. The NTSB representative indicated the may incident suggest broader systemic problems at Ethiopian Airlines and expects as a result that the NTSB will undertake further investigation of the company. Jones, who has worked extensively in Ethiopia, noted that the airline has enjoyed an excellent international rating and is a source of pride for the Ethiopian government. He expected the investigation process to be difficult, and noted that he may return to Beirut in the coming week

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